

A  
Struggle  
within the  
Struggle

— Nalini Nayak



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## **A Struggle within The Struggle**

*An experience of a group of women*

*by Nalini Nayak*

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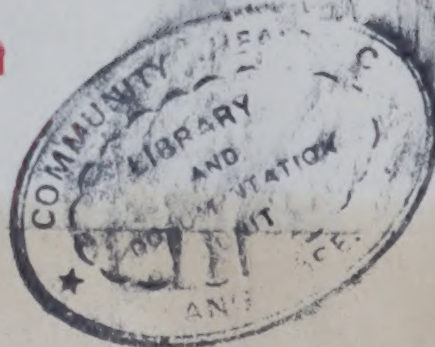
*Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say "I feel empty somehow... incomplete". Or she would say "I feel as if I don't exist."*

*The Problem Without A Name.*

*Betty Friedan*

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## INTRODUCTION

These pages that follow try to document a work process pertaining to women that originated in the community project at Marianad, Trivandrum. The work in this community encompassed the entire community and was taken up by a multi-disciplinary, male and female team. The purpose in documenting this particular aspect of the work is two-fold.

1. To highlight the manner in which any mobilization and empowerment of women receives an equal and opposite reaction from the men.
2. To document the process and development of feminist consciousness of a group of activists on the one hand, and of the women in the community on the other.

The write-up employs a descriptive—cum—reflective style as it tries to record the events as and when they took place together with a reflection in retrospect. This has been done only to help explain the reason for certain happenings.

The first part of the document is in three parts.

1. The work among women in Marianad
2. The reflection among the activists (1983 onwards)
3. The efforts to raise the women's question among the women of the fishing community (1983 onwards)

The reflection in the first part is wanting in one way in that it is the reflection of only one woman who has been continuously in this field, although a number of other women were associated with the work at various stages. The effort to put it down on

paper is an invitation to broader feedback. Parts 2 and 3 of the first document reflect the ongoing work and reflection of the group involved at present.

This part is followed by eight life stories of women, their childhood, youth and married life. These life stories reflect the variety as well as the similarities in the lives of the women of the fishing community.

The framework of the reflection is the life of the women of the fishing community in Trivandrum District. Although the material conditions of these women have gradually been changing over the last decade, their way of life for the most part, remains the same.

### **The context**

The "community" here refers to the active fishing community and includes the women who participate in fish related activities outside the home and 70% of whom periodically, if not regularly, go to the market. All the women are self-employed and have continued to remain so in Trivandrum District. This group falls into the informal sector because in a way the material conditions themselves defeat the economies of scale in this particular context. To explain this development in the means of production necessitates a re-organization of the labour process and simultaneously affects the pattern of distribution of the product. Until three years ago the fishermen very selectively made improvements in the production gear being guided by their traditional logic to continue to have a means of livelihood on the one hand and to optimise returns vis a vis cost and effort of production on the other. This basic logic therefore had a different emphasis to the maximization of profit of a capitalist. Aware of the fact that it is the natural resource and not capital alone that is the basis of their survival, the fishermen prove to have been very selective about the manner in which they have increased their capital assets. eg. the fishing craft—the cattamaram—had not been replaced over all these decades—until it became impossible to get the wood to make them any more. The cattamaram though primitive to look at is the most appropriate technology for the open seas of



the Trivandrum coast. In fact, even when efforts were made to replace the cattamaram the substitute had to have all the qualities of the former and an added benefit in order to be accepted. On the other hand there have been many improvements and developments in the line of fishing gear over the decades in an effort to keep the fishermen productive for a larger number of days in a year. In a way these two conditions have balanced each other. While as gear helped increase of productivity, the size of the cattamaram set limits to the catch. This in turn has left a space for the increase in population. The entire balance has been overturned over the last decade when short-sighted increased production became the guideline for government's intervention in fisheries. Together with such material conditions of the sea, the distribution of the population on the land also added another challenge to the economies of scale. A widely scattered rural population and rural markets, where purchasing power is also low, made less capital intensive methods of distribution more meaningful. Such conditions have therefore necessitated that the quantity and price of fish landed can be handled by a marketing network that responds to the nature of the market.

According to J. Kurien (1984) Trivandrum accounts for 50% of the total fish catch of Kerala (241 tonnes) of which 64% is sold in auction and 69% of which is sold by women fish vendors (head load) and 23% by cycle load merchants (men), the final market of which is 53% in the neighbouring internal market and 43% in the internal distant market. He adds, 'there is more movement of human weight than fish weight'.

The division of labour therefore has remained unchanged—men in production and women in the distribution. But this does not mean that the pressure that both have been exposed—to have remained the same, with the result that those who remain in the profession can survive only at a level of subsistence, while a number have been forced to strive for a livelihood in other professions. It must be noted here that members of this community have only this trade to live by—owning no land or possessing no other skills.



At the level of their collective life it must be indicated that over the last 400 years the influences have also remained unchanged—except for the last decade. With life revolving around the church, the church has been the main seat of ideological production which has been consistent with the ideology of the State—except for a brief period. The church like the State promulgated the value that wealth is the result of hard work and legitimised usury and private property. The church also had an added advantage of appeasing the poor with the bible texts—that God will look after tomorrow and that suffering in this life will be rewarded in the next. Although it could not emphasise the domestic ideology as such, it nevertheless moralised between 'good' and 'bad' women; the 'good' women being those who cared well for the children and were submissive to their husbands. Here again, it used the bible to stress that women are to obey their men and hence kept them out of any social decision making process. The only time when the fishing community marched against the State was when the communists came to power in 1957. Then, under the leadership of the church the fishworkers took to the Streets in opposition to the government. There are elements of change in this framework over the last decade but not sufficiently many as to lead to any generalizations.



## **WOMEN IN THE PROCESS OF ORGANISATION**

The experience of work in Marianad and its ripples.

'We will fight it to the end and show them that we just cannot be trampled over because we are women' was what some women were forced to exclaim when they faced a point of extermination after years of work to build their own organisation and make their presence felt in the village (1985).

Looking back into what probably led to this is the interesting history of not only a group of village women who were torn between the demands of traditional female roles and their desire to be considered free human beings on the one hand, but also of a group of middle class women who struggled to see that women continue to play their role in the development process.

What follows is a reflection on a process of organisation. While the essay concentrates only on the role of women in the development process it will certainly relate to the men who of course provide the relief in which the woman's role is understood. Moreover the actual organisational work was a work that included the entire community, undertaken by a group of men and women.

### **The historical background**

The initiation of development work among the fish workers of Kerala was the brain child of the Bishop of Trivandrum, P. B. Pereira, assisted by a group of development planners of the Indian Social Institute—a group of male experts. The integrated master plan stressed the improvement of the community in areas like housing, credit for fishing requisites and health

care. No explicit methods of operation were worked out although it implied the then prevailing philosophy of community development. The majority of Christians under the Latin Christian diocese of Trivandrum belonged to the fishing community. Having been converted to christianity over 400 years ago, the church had laid deep roots in the minds, hearts and cultural traditions of these fishworkers and who on their part were the main-stay of the Latin Church in Trivandrum District. It was these fishworkers who were mobilised and taken on to the streets of the city to oppose the newly elected communist Government of 1957 on the pretext that they were taking over the educational institutions—an area in which the stakes of the church were very high. Ironically enough the majority in the fishing community have continued to be illiterate and survive at a level of subsistence. The Church on its part had played the traditional role of amelioration of poverty through alms giving and charity. It was this young and first Indian Bishop of Trivandrum in the late 50's, inspired by ideas of Vatican II, who envisioned a development programme for these people—a very progressive move for that particular historical time.

He realised that aid would be available from abroad for some genuine development work. He had also met a group of christian lay professional women in Europe, who were perparing volunteers to go oversees—and such a programme became a feasible reality.

Who were the women who came? There was Claire a French Canadian in her 40's who had already worked in Gujarat and hence the leader of the team, a social worker by profession. Gaetane also another French Canadian in her 30's another social worker but with a special qualification in women's education whose first experience it was to go to a Third World country and similarly Lauretta an Italian in her 30's a nurse by profession.

### **The first contacts**

1962-66. This was the period of finding the way, establishing the contacts and rapport with people, laying the foundations. The team spent their time learning the language and learning



to live in India. Their teacher was a man, a disciplinarian who also told them the expectations men have of women in India.... their dress, manner of behaviour and as it was mainly the Christians they related to, their relation to the Church, priests etc. Adjusting to the changes in the physical life conditions was probably not half so difficult as being forced to play this new woman's role. It was not that they had very modern feminist ideas but it was simply the fact that feudal roles were more the norm in the early 60's in India than they were in Europe.

When the team moved to the village—it was nothing else than a few houses constructed on a barren sandy patch—an area called Allilathura or 'no man's land'. The first few families were already living in and these were the first real teachers. With a desire to start from where the people were, to start with their needs and to encourage them to thus participate as much as possible, the approach of working with people was more of mutual sharing or learning.... learning about their way of living, their problems, their aspirations and beliefs. It was probably the first time that the women of the fishing community had found people who would listen to them and being women they were more free and open, i.e. they didn't accept a target oriented approach. Being women, they interacted more with the day to day living habits of the people—habits of child-bearing and child rearing, food and nutrition, sanitation and the chores of daily life. Much of what they heard those days became the foundations for later work and much of it had to do with the life or drudgery that was the fate of the woman.

### **Daily Life**

Starting off from basics—a woman always had a child at her breasts, even old women easily offered the breast as a pacifier to the grand child, or quite willingly a woman with breast milk would offer it to a hungry, unsatisfied yelling baby. Women said they continued to breast feed for  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 years because this was the way of avoiding another pregnancy and what else could one feed a baby on anyway? So there was constant 'threat' of pregnancy which meant the women were completely at the disposal of the men and why not. He went out to sea, a daring and

completely exhausting job. Returning to the shore he needed food, a drink and then his woman. She was there for him after all and faithful she had to be because he was at the mercy of the mother of the sea (Kadamma) who protected him if she was faithful. Yet, in itself the sexual relation was unclean or rather, the man was contaminated in sex and was obliged to bathe before entering the sea again. So wait for him she did all the day. Not knowing when he returned from the sea, she spent long hours on the sea shore with a bottle of rice-water and her basket. This waiting she considered a necessity—it was probably her chance to take a rest, sitting with other women listening to and participating in the discussion of local events.... leaving her house and all there was to the older children—the older girl who plays the mothering roles from very young. Then finally there she spots him on the horizon—only she can tell it's he on his way home—he amidst all the other cattamarams and their sails looking so much alike. When he does get to shore her anxious eyes are on his basket—has he been lucky today. Handing him the rice-water, she takes over the fish and in a way her task transforms her.

She suddenly becomes assertive, aggressive, and business like. If she doesn't get a good price in the auction, she has to take it herself to the market. In split seconds, she makes up her mind—computing the pros and cons in regard to shore prices. If she auctions on the shore, she haggles for a cash advance for the days expenses. If not, she hurries off, folding up her skirts, to the market. On this path she encounters another world. A world in which she is socially rated as a 'mukkuvathi' and all that goes along with it. 'Mukkuvathi' is a woman of the fishing caste now christian, who is kept at a distance for the smell of fish she emanates, her loud argumentative voice and aggressive behaviour.... But what has made her this way. First of all sheer fatigue—walking 8-12 Km. a day with heavy loads of fish on her head. Secondly having to sell to customers who need fish but who treat her like dirt wanting the most benefit and that to on credit—so return she must for the cash. And then in the market, learning to compete with the men merchants who would have reached there on their cycles earlier, she has to project the brawn required to deal with market forces and secure the best price she



can because she, unlike her male counterparts has to buy the necessary food to take home and cook for the hungry mouths that will be awaiting her return. So off she goes, sometimes stopping at the teashop for a cup of tea to compare her gains with other women vendors. Once home, her immediate task is to get the night meal ready. If she has a daughter so much the better, she will have some help. Nevertheless brief is the time that she may have to just sit back, chew some beetle, get over her day's exhaustion and listen to what the children have to say. Often her husband, if not out for a drink or a card game, will be at his nets getting them ready for the next day. Rarely words of affection on the day's progress are exchanged. Food is the main concern and since it is anyway such a drudgery to prepare it all at the wood fires, it is dished out with equal callousness—the larger and better portions being for the husband and the sons and then the females. Cleaning the plates-etc. which is not a big ritual, is again done by the women and finally she is so exhausted, she falls to sleep but not without performing her services to her husband.

It is all such a routine—and a daily one at that. Its one day at a time unlike agricultural families who live from one season to the next. Very much in keeping with the biblical teaching.... Mathew 6: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?... Therefore do not be anxious, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'what shall we drink?' or 'what shall we wear'. So there is no forethought for the morrow.... not even a food reserve in case of an emergency. For every little thing they have to run to little store and if it really is an emergency then all purchase is on credit. Calculating the daily expenditure of a family was then extremely easy—everything is bought for just one day. Nothing to offer a visitor if one happens to visit. Tea and coffee are purchased from the tea-shop. Even little ones on their way to school stop at the tea-shop to either drink tea, buy a piece of 'putu' or some 'kadala'. So that's how the normal diet of rice, tapioca and some fish, gets balanced with an added drop of milk, some green mango, and if one is better off, may be even a banana. So for all practical purposes the intake is not so bad but why then do so many look

anaemic, have big stomachs—what about the latrines?—Oh those don't exist. The men have always used the sea and the women the surrounding marshes—children squat any and everywhere. So there is a lot of infection, there is scabies and may be more serious diseases. But how do women really manage, what do they do during menstruation? They use old rags. Some of them pack sand as an absorbant in the rags. Others just stay at home.

To the marshes or to the well, those are all the daily 'outings' for a woman undertaken in as casual a manner as possible. Women carry on long conversations as they squat in the bushes. None carry water with them. Wipe themselves they do with a leaf, or old paper and then stroll back home.... all this generally before sunrise. And the ritual at the well is equally relaxed—with clothes to wash, vessels to clean and then their own baths. Married women and men are often at the same well with little or no inhibitions. This is a result of marriage—after which women are more free with men. In fact after marriage they even loose interest in keeping themselves clean, beautiful and attractive. Marriage qualifies them to be a machine that is ready to work at the disposal of their men and kids the rest of their lives. The young attractive girl who kept herself clean and dressed—breasts covered, suddenly becomes sloppy, hair rarely combed—breasts and midriff exposed—a total contrast. She becomes a thing merely to be used. Asked why this happens one gets so many different answers, 'we should not attract other men' 'other women will speak about us' etc. etc. And so she is tied to her new role by the norms that have been predetermined. But is her husband equally concerned, is he forced to be as faithful—not by the norms. 'If I am not faithful to him, kadamma will not protect him at sea' is a constant fear she lives under—there is no parallel for him. So while as he does very freely take the liberty to engage in extra marital sex (often in other communities) woe to her if she does something similar. Kadamma takes on the ferocious violence of a mob who literally beat her brutally together with the man who has dared to indulge in the same with her. And then comes all the public retribution, she has to carry the large wooden cross and ask forgiveness in the church.



She is thus circumscribed by the religious norms. Religion is her hope and her conscience.... it is her only recourse—see her in the evening when the lamps begin to dispell the darkness.... she and the family sing their hearts out to heaven. The cycle is understood. For an outsider unused to such a hard life situation, unused to squalor and a life of subsistence, one wonders what keeps these women smiling, what keeps them going. So here it is, the faith that they are children of God, that God listens to them, protects them and that real happiness is waiting for them in a land of plenty after death. Night prayers are the only moments when the whole family is together and in restful peace. Observing the men and women with closed eyes, imploring the almighty is a sign of their trust in a power beyond and an absorber of the day's trials and tribulations. No psychiatrist can offer a better couch for the gut expression of the day's experience. They are confident that He listens to them and whatever be His answer, it is His will and hence their total resignation to it.

One would have to mention here the difference of religious expression at various levels. First of all between the men and women: while as there is equal representation of men and women at the church services, there are probably a larger number of men who participate in religious practices merely as a ritual. A larger number of women can be found imploring their God and even shedding tears or falling asleep in His presence. A larger number of women than men will participate in the numerous pious associations that revolve around the church. All these associations either take care of the temporal needs or are said to provide a mediation between the now and the here-after accompanied by monetary collections which provide a material basis for their survival. Yet, in the management of the church, its the men who play the leading role and sport colourful robes to stand out from the crowd on all special church days.

But what has made them think and feel this way? Total resignation to the hard life conditions is not the lot of merely those in the fishing community. It happens to be the only choice of all those who suffer and see no way out of suffering.

In more educated rungs of society, the general outlook of sub-mission is created through the social hierarchy of caste. In religions where the word of God is preached and carried to all corners, the trend is to moralise on daily life—emphasising all the do's and don'ts which contribute to maintaining *the status quo* aspects like female subordination, of sin as an individual concept, profit being the reward for hard work and better days after death for those who suffer now are all the values projected. Unfortunately these are misinterpretations of the gospel values but serve the need of the present capitalist society. It is no wonder therefore that women accept the drudgery of day-to-day life and then cry out with their hearts to their God when they are tired and cannot make ends meet, when they can physically take it no longer.

### **Beginning to work in the fishing community**

This was the community and the women the team lived and worked with. Making a beginning was difficult. People had always been used to charity. The Bishop was their earthly father, he was bound to care for them. The white people were rich, they had money for the asking. But the team had no such destructive intentions. Confident that people could learn to change their lives, could learn if they were given opportunities, could learn to live hygienically with even minimum resources and live happily by building new bonds of community through combined action, the team went ahead in a professional community development approach following the basic principles of.

- 1) Start with the people's expressed needs.
- 2) Nothing to be given free
- 3) Maximum participation by the people.

And so the initial work began. A little dispensary that had prevention and immunisation as its focus was started. Family oriented programmes, house keeping, kitchen gardens, personal hygiene and bringing up of children—all on a person to person basis and then a few community oriented programmes like disposal of garbage, small savings; community games etc.



The reason why children were neglected became obvious. The woman's routine did not give her any time to care for the children and children were only the woman's responsibility. With the result that the eldest daughter from the age that she could physically do anything independently, had to take responsibility for the younger kids thereby dropping out of school. Common was the sight to see the kids and hens eating out of the same plate with no adults around. Lack of cleanliness was the cause for rampant scabies and since drawing water was such a drudgery, only the bare necessity was drawn.

Many incentives therefore were given for personal hygiene and the need to care for the children below the age of 5 years was particularly stressed. It is from this that the idea of the creche gradually evolved. The little children could gather in one place when the mothers went off to market. One woman would remain behind in rotation to care for the children. This creche together with the dispensary became the place where women came together, had time to share ideas with each other and learn to appreciate that a little added child care made for a more healthy and bright child.

The creche evolved into a nursery where at once the mothers noticed how the creative abilities of a child could blossom, they began to enjoy their children, began to realise that education was worth some of their hard earned money began to see that they had a part to play in making or destroying the child. This closeness with the children became also a window into the life of the homes. Children reflected all the problems of the home, used the language of the home, reflected the male female relations of the home—even the sex act. It was clear that children could equally reflect the new values of school in the home; used to a toilet in school, the children wanted it at home; washing their hands before the meal, they did it at home. Having a daily bath, coming combed and dressed became a source of pride.

### **The young girls in the community**

And so it happened with the young girls too. Freed from the burdens of caring for the younger children now and in an

attempt to give them an outlet from household chores, they began to come together to learn something about their life and world and to talk about themselves. All kinds of taboos restrict the free movement and behaviour of young girls. The start of menstruation is the deadline and after that she becomes a liability. She loses her child-like liberties over night and now has to be protected. Her chastity has to be guarded and the easiest way is to get her married off. The team made all efforts to break this inhuman situation. The restrictions made on young girls had their automatic repercussions. Having seen from childhood that male and female when together sleep together (as that's the only time their parents are together) the adolescent urges seem to desire to be expressed in this manner alone. Heaped on this are the good old religious taboos—the fear of sex—which make even normal human relations immoral and so the queues at the confessionals of young girls confessing how many times they had looked at a boy, thought about him, may be even made passes at him—and for that she is asked to make a penance. Where constant vigil of the adults becomes difficult it is possible that a girl experiences a sexual relation before marriage and if unfortunately she gets pregnant she is forcefully married off. It can also happen that getting pregnant is the way to marry the man one's parents may not accept.

It was all this that gradually began to change once the girls started coming together freely talking about their pent up feeling, their fears and preoccupations, their hopes and aspirations. It was strange to realise that the words of the body that are so often used in abusive language (mainly the sexual organs) raised any number of giggles and caused embarrassment when used in basic anatomy classes. Women never look at their own bodies, the absence of mirrors and even privacy does not make this possible. Then the taboo, that sexual feelings are sinful, curbs the appreciation and pride for one's own body. It is never to be enjoyed, only to be used for a purpose. So even before marriage her value as an object is embedded in her mind—then how will she rebel?

The young girls that came together then began to learn useful handicrafts to beautify their homes, learn embroidery



and tailoring. These earnings were saved up to buy themselves some gold. This ensured that they would not be married off very young and indeed the age of marriage, for a certain period, did increase. These processes also encouraged young girls to pursue their education and today children who have passed through the nursery have completed some professional education too.

### **The growth of the team**

By this time there were also changes in the team. The first three foreign volunteers were joined or replaced by others, Lucille, Alina, and then gradually other Indians—Rachel, Seraphine and Nalini. The team did not exceed four at any time. But by 68-69 the team dwindled to Lauretta and Nalini and the first male member Eugene—also the first member from the fishing community, joined the team.

From the beginning of the 70's local young people from within and outside the community also began to get involved in the work at the service of the people's organisations that began to take shape.

### **Deeper involvement in the life of the community**

With the passage of time, the understanding of the life of the fishing community was deepened. The initial idea of Utopian community development became a misnomer as the socio-economic matrix of the community revealed itself. Fishing appeared a lucrative occupation, but the fish workers remained poor. Where did their earnings go? Yes, there were indeed some wasteful practices which had their foundation in the firm belief that 'God will provide for tomorrow'. But these beliefs were also the means through which the fishworkers were exploited by money lenders and merchants. When God did not provide for the morrow, there was the money lenders offering easy cash on condition that the catch of the morrow would be sold by him and 5% of the catch being his share.

Or again their great faith in God materialised in their belonging to the church which was their pride to support through

a tax of 5% of their daily earnings. Here again, the right to collect the tax was auctioned to the big merchants who actually paid only a portion of it to the church because it was paid in a lumpsum.

The contradictions and the various class interests within the community itself began to surface. How could harmonious community development be a possibility when the unjust economic order was institutionalised—bondedness, indebtedness? And the movement to oppose these structures began. This resulted in the formation of the fishermen co-operative society—which in itself was a formidable feat as it involved a struggle and the will of self assertion on the part of the fishermen.

### **The struggle within a struggle**

At the time of the planning of the co-operative, the women were not included—the co-operative turned out to be a complete male organization as we had not paid importance to the fact that women played an important role in the sale of fish. We had seen production as a totally male activity in the usual manner in which women's work is discounted as being non-productive. But it was interesting to note that it was the women who dealt with the co-operative. It was they who took over once the fish reached the shore. It was they who went to the co-operative office to collect the cash. It was they who raised a hue and cry when things went wrong. When opposition arose at each point to the functioning of the co-operative—for example when the moneylender wanted to construct a marketing shed on public property—the women were very involved to stop it. It seemed to be a common feeling that 'if our women understand, we will not have too many problems'—pejoratively to express that women are the trouble makers.

Gradually by 1972-73 the women began to express that they wanted to get together and so we did. But what did coming together mean—what did they want to do together? This they discussed among themselves. The older group wanted a pious association as there were none in the village. The younger women reacted to this—these pious associations turn out to be gossip centres they said. On the other hand they



had no objection to come together to pray, discuss village problems etc.

In the initial stage one member of the team took the responsibility of preparing the meetings—as the women decided to meet once a month. According to the desires of the women the meeting consisted of 3 parts—The first was a religious reflection not a traditional prayer but a reading and reflection of a bible text. These were very animated discussions.

a. because women had never listened attentively to bible texts.

b. on listening to them in a context, they began to realise that they were not moralising on 'spiritual life' but had to do with day to day life.

c. There were two ways of interpreting the texts—the traditional other-world interpretation, the here and now interpretation,

The second part was an educational class—and a large spectrum of subjects were discussed. The third part concentrated on day to day village problems and what we could do about them.

It was amazing to see the ideas and interest women displayed on looking at local issues. Once the process gained momentum, the community organizer concentrated on the process of group formation.

1. Some official procedures had to be created—like membership to the general body and the committee to take executive responsibility. The committee had to be elected and learn to gradually take responsibility. This was indeed the important task as it was also the means to build leadership in the community. It was stressed that only women and not young girls be committee members—even if the women were illiterate.

Weekly meetings of the committee were held with the community organizer. At these meetings the decision taken at the general body were discussed, action was taken and the next month's meeting was prepared. It was important

that these women learnt the general principle of administration—keeping a record of their own discussions—they began to conduct the monthly meetings themselves—the president presiding, the secretary reading the report, the members of the committee taking up one subject at a time for discussion, the treasurer keeping track of the accounts, etc. Although the community organizer was therefore officially not part of the committee, she necessarily had to play some part in facilitating the process.

2. The participation of the members both in the meetings and in the activities.
  - the manner in which discussions take place
  - speaking and listening
  - not being afraid of being laughed at and the freedom to ask questions etc.
3. The structuring of the organisation from the point of view of continuity.
  - regularity of meetings
  - regularity in participation
  - contribution to the organisation in terms of a subscription
  - records and accounts.

It is interesting to note that these monthly meetings took place almost without fail from 1974 to 1985. The participation at these meetings was on the average between 30—60 women. The Committees were elected every year but were normally re-elected for a 2nd year so that they gained some experience and independence in handling things on their own.

Once they began to feel they had a real role to play in their village after being successful in a few issues like exposing the corruption in the public distribution system etc., they asked for representation on the church committee and this was accepted (as the parish was just beginning to take shape) thereby moving into the central decision making body in the village.

Although we had not considered women a part of the production process initially we had realised that they have a role to play in helping the co-operative live upto its ideal—a



kind of a watch dog role. This is because it was they who experienced its day to day existence on the sea shore and had a lot to say about it—the fact that men merchants were preferred to them, that people with ready cash were preferred to credit sales, that salesmen took a cut and made reductions in fish, that prices were exceptionally high, that other ice fish was reaching the market before them, etc. etc. And all these complaints they took back to the co-operative, hopeful that steps would be taken to rectify the situation. The big check on the co-operative came when the apex body of the co-operative—the Federation—decided to have retail outlets in the city. The Federation considered this a step forward in modern fish marketing but as soon as the women heard this they reacted saying that these retail outlets were in areas in which they sold fish and they would be displaced. Hence the Federation had to stop its programme at once. It was at these points that we became more aware of the manner in which the men finally intended to take over and began to realise our great lack of foresight in keeping the women outside the co-operative.

The co-operatives began to be strong economic institutions in the villages and also began to generate power because of their economic control. What finally happened was that all the service activities in the village, the non-economic work like pre-school education, adult education, health work, cultural groups were all the concern of the women. For the support of all these activities, the women had to approach the men. In most cases the men imposed all their conditions and posed all kinds of questions to the women—making them on every occasion feel inferior and stupid.

**Cases in point are:**

### *1) The Mariand ration shop*

This was an example of how women put up a genuine struggle to get a fair price shop in their village. This was because they were so cheated by the local fair price shops. It was a known fact that it is difficult to run a fair price shop honestly because of very low profit margins. But the women decided that they would do so and managed to convince the District Collector that they would. The shop was sanctioned

and they began to run it, very soon realising that they would need extra funds to keep it going. When they approached the co-operative for financial and supervisory assistance (because they had hired professional people to run their co-operative), the only answer they got was to hand over the shop to the co-operative—and this is what they finally did. (By this time it had become a burden for women who had tried to run the shop on a voluntary basis). But again, it was the women who one day gheraoed the inspectors who had come to suspend the shop when there was a deficit in the stock balance. Women were aware of this as they had decided not to cheat the consumers on the weights. They rang the church bell and all the women assembled as all the men were out at sea. It became known in the city that the women of Marianad were very organised and had their way—so much so that inspectors were afraid to come there in the future.

## *2) The Health Work*

Again, the little health work that went on in the village was oriented mainly to preventive care. Preventive care is more a mobilisation and educative activity which does not generate any earnings although it is undertaken by professional para medical hands who have to be remunerated. For this too the women were short of funds. When they discussed this with the men, all the men could say was that what they required was a hospital for curative care with well trained doctors and if the women left the health work to them they would go ahead and organize it. The women refused firstly on the ground that there were curative facilities in the neighbourhood and secondly because they were aware of the fact that the diseases prevalent in the area were of a preventable nature and that the education process had to go on. The men, on the other hand did not consider a dispensary prestigious enough to support and refused to support this demand of the women. Eventually when the women could no longer muster any resources, they were forced to terminate the paramedical staff and continue their cleanliness drives once in a way.

## *3) The case of the 'grotto'*

Marianad was an unusual village, in that it did not have its own church. The women had always wanted a place to pray



together and they decided to build their own grotto, and so they did from their own little collections. It was a place where both traditional and more spontaneous community prayer took place. It also had a small collection where people dropped offerings. The women had decided to use these offerings for their village activity and they did this very conscientiously. When the people began to plan to build their church—one of the first things that the men thought of was to take possession of the collection box—the priest saying that in no village did women have control of the grotto. Although the women tried to oppose this, they finally gave in on the ground that they would continue to receive  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the collection for their activities. They received this on exactly one occasion and never after. They lost their limited source of funds for their village work.

#### 4) *Finally*

It was in the same way that the women were ousted from the church committee. Unlike in other villages women were on the church committee before there was a regular parish priest. These were elected committees. Everything was handled democratically. When the regular parish priest came, he found it difficult to adjust to (1) women being on the committee (2) the fact that the committee needed to know about the accounts (3) that it was the women who asked for accounts, fought the practice of sitting fees etc. (sitting fees is a certain amount of money that a member of a committee receives for his participation in a meeting—because participating in a meeting is taking time off from his 'productive' activity). The easiest thing was to get the women out and it did not need a serious effort of the priest, because he was willingly supported by the men.

With these seemingly inconspicuous moves, gradually women began to be phased out of the decision making process in the village and in a way their women's organization began to be isolated—or to function in isolation.

#### **The role of the team**

Here it may be interesting to mention the role of the team in the organisational process. As mentioned earlier in 1968 the all-women team was extended to include a male team member

and for the following 7 years the team consisted of 2 male and 2 female members and gradually began to expand its activities to a larger group, working in a larger area, being joined by other workers too.

But the years between '68 and '75 were years of intensive mobilisation when many of the seeds of the community processes were sown and began to bear fruit. The internal dynamics on the team are also worth noting because they have certainly a role in the organizational process too.

The oldest and most experienced and respected member of the team was a woman. The first young man who joined the team and who was from the fishing community itself was accepted as the leader of the action as he was indeed a person with charisma and a natural leader. But such a leader—full of ideas and enthusiasm—required a left and a right hand to follow-up all that was initiated and this lot fell to the 2 women who always had to work out the details and do the 'dogs' work. The women more concerned about doing things the right way, seeing that people grew through the process and there could not but be conflicts with the male member who was more achievement oriented. But conflict was never seen as destructive of the human relations within the team and though the women continued to protest, the male member finally got his way. At that time the women had no tools to analyse this process, but looking back on it now it is clear that this particular male chauvanist, unconsciously mooted all the sanctions against the women in the village who gradually were ousted from the decision making process and later made the object of much criticism.

What finally remained as the proof of the different focus of attention in the process of building up young leadership was the rather large group of young village women who took up animation work at the village level as the team gradually began to withdraw while there were no young men coming forward. Despite the fact the women's organisation began to be marginalised in the decision making process, these young women animators did not give up, they continued through their village contacts to be present every where.... and had



quite a contact with village youth. Here again, as the village animators were young unmarried women, they were chided, criticized and commented on by the men. The right wing political male youth leaders could not stand this daring and cut the electricity the day they organised a village drama for the encouragement of youth talent. Every kind of opposition only brought added strength to the young women animators—but which in a way also isolated them more in the village. The one person who personified all the male ego in the village was the priest who is normally king in the fishing village and who normally has all the women at his beck and call. Here he could not only get the things he ordered done, but here were women who were questioning his action at each particular step. So he had to silence these women.

The way he tried to bring in his domination and undisputed place was first through the centralization of the religious services. He gradually began to destabilize all the participatory processes created by the team because that was his domain. Secondly by building up a series of pious associations and introducing in a binding manner, the indulgences cult, mystifying religion once again and assuring security in traditional practice. (The cult of indulgences is an old Roman catholic practice of buying one's salvation). Until 1978 there was no such pious association in Marianad but introducing these was the only manner in which the priest could enter the daily life of the community. He began indirectly, by inviting visiting priests to the village and once the ground was prepared, he took over. By 1984—85 the priest found himself occupied almost on a full-time basis in the village-daily mass, sometimes two, attending to all other religious rituals, creating new ones like novenas, evening prayer, meetings etc of the pious associations—all going alongside the construction of the church and the drives to collect money for the same.

How and why did this marginalization process take place?

By 1977—78 the Community Organizers decided it was time for them to move out of the village. Similar work had started in other areas. A number of young women from the fishing community were taking active responsibility in Marianad

and other areas. The people's organizations were functioning actively and people were actively participating at all levels.

The women's organization took over all the activities—like the creche, the dispensary and health programme, the young girls centre, the adult education programme and were handling them well with a little guidance from the team. It was felt that it was time to move out and let the people handle their own affairs.

In the absence of the women team members who were not from the fishing community, all the new values that women were inculcating, all the new spirit of involvement and strength they displayed, began to be questioned. The final blow came when it was realised that all the physical assets were in the name of the women's organization and that they would take up income generating programmes themselves.

Then they had to be controlled. The priest has to be in control. His first demand was that he be the president of the women's organization. This he was blatantly refused. So he decided to import a group of religious sisters who could take over the activities. It was using the religious mask once again that he destabilized the entire village and shattered the women's organization.

It is a year now since this has taken place. Not a single meeting has been held and the women begin to retrace their steps. The confidence and strength built up all these years will have to resurface, its form and strength can be assessed only in the future. They haven't lost hope.

### **The problem of the organizational structure**

As the main organizational thrust in working with women was to help them participate in their own organization and development—the structural formalities were kept simple and manageable.

1. Simple things like report books. There was one for the general body meetings and one for the committee meetings so that the committee could easily turn to its old resolutions.



2. At a meeting the attendance of the members was taken but not their signatures. The attendance book was a separate one from the report book where members are meant to sign their names. This was also done to facilitate the collection of fees and to see at a glance whether women were regular or not—as they lost their membership if they didn't participate regularly.

This and similar practices which made management simple was disapproved when the organization registered itself. Even the framing of their own bye-laws became a hurdle for registration. Every organization had to accept the stereotype.

Although 'formal', official procedure are the norm, these stringent requirements certainly came initially in the way of women of the grass roots spontaneously taking up responsibility. Once they begin to rely on help, they prefer it that way and then always hesitate to take responsibility.

### **The achievement of this involvement**

Although the experience is documented at a moment when the women's organization has been stripped of its power, the entire process has been an experiment in empowering women, through self-activity. Although empowerment here does not mean the power to control one's life and one's body, it does mean strength in collective activity.

The next part of the essay deals with the gradual growth of consciousness of patriarchy and gender justice.





## AN INTERLUDE

I would like to mention in slightly greater detail the evolution of work from the period of intensive involvement in Marianad.

Marianad was meant to be an experiment in community organization and as explained earlier, an experiment of people participating in their own development. The idea was that lessons learnt in the process could be shared and that others could see for themselves that it was possible to animate new processes of participation at the village level.

When the co-operative began to stabilise and returns from fishing proved lucrative, there was an inflow of people into Marianad who came as seasonal labour. Such workers came to learn of what was taking place in Marianad and then began to ask for a similar set-up in their villages. Simultaneously, in an effort to share the experience learnt, the team decided to organize various kinds of training programmes so that young educated people from other areas could see the meaning of taking up leadership for change in their villages. There was a five month residential training programme for young women and many ten day leadership camps for youth. It was these young men and women who tried to respond to requests from the fishermen and women in their villages while the team of Marianad stood by offering the guidance when required. New members who began to join the team after 1975 also then took up residence in other villages to try to respond to needs as they arose. It was in these ways that organizational work gradually evolved in other areas of the district with new approaches and new experiences.

By 1977-78 the physical withdrawal process began to take place in Marianad and in 1980 it was complete with some

members of the team visiting off and on. In 1977 already the official organization, the P. C. O., was registered with headquarters in Trivandrum. The team of social workers, formally working under the auspices of the Diocese now were autonomous. With the withdrawal of the team from Marianad, the administrative centre of the P. C. O. became the city of Trivandrum although there continued to be community organizers at the village level.

In 1979 the women's organizations came together and decided to initiate their struggle for transport to go to the market and by 1980 the Independent fishworkers Union was born.

To give an idea of the structural scenario at the beginning of the 80's it may help to indicate the following:

- Autonomous women's organizations at the village level
- Primarily level fishermen's cooperative societies affiliated at the district level
- The P. C. O. an N. G. O. with headquarters in the city undertaking
- Grass root organizational work at the village level
- Action oriented research in fisheries
- Training of fishworkers
- The autonomous Independent fishworkers Union agitating for the rights of the fishworkers
- Two or three other N. G. O. s and action groups beginning to work with fishworkers in the district

## FROM WORKING WITH WOMEN TO OUR CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

December 1985

Approximately 4 years ago it suddenly dawned on me that there certainly was something genuine in all those questions raised to me by my feminist friends.... "are you not even afraid about the fact that you can be raped when you travel alone? Don't you feel discriminated against as a woman? How do you accept to play all the traditional feminine roles in the household



in your style of community living, thereby offering a convenient comfortable home atmosphere for the men house-mates?' etc. No, honestly, 4 years ago these questions had never bothered me. I was convinced that there is a certain amount of complementarity between male and female roles and that excessive demands made by women which resulted in their frustrations as being 'wife' of some man were acquired, middle class frustrations that working class women had no time to worry about.

My own background until about 1980 had not given me the opportunity to experience discrimination on the grounds of my sex, although one of the causes for initially choosing to remain unmarried was the rejection of the fact that (1) a woman had to be married or without any time to choose and prove oneself in a career and that (2) once married, the woman became a mere appendage of her husband. These conclusions were not the result of personal experience but of observation and so I happily had the opportunity to launch out into the field of community organization together with a team of a few other women who had also chosen to remain un-married with the motivation of being more at the disposal of people. I had come up with no real obstacles, I began to feel that certain temperaments like mine were meant to live single and therefore being single or married was a question of temperament for either man or woman and it was when the choice to remain single or married didn't coincide with temperament that problems developed. These were my conclusions in my twenties and these years were so occupied with the unravelling of the historical evolution of society, as my involvement with the fishing community revealed, that the question of marriage didn't arise. Understanding the contradictions in the area of fisheries and plunging in my lot with the people who struggled for survival in the fishing community involved me completely and there seemed to be neither the time nor 'openness' to other questions which at that time seemed secondary. Nevertheless, all through these years I worked a lot with women of the fishing community realising their hidden potentials, building up their skills, going into their problems as workers and entering an organizationally process (explained separately). Personally and organizationally, I always fought for more space for women but looking back it was more

from a point of view of developing a more realistic democratic process and helping them get a broader vision of society. Whenever their personal problems came up, I approached them in a conventional counselling manner—being myself a product of a conventional school of social work. For instance if a woman complained about a non co-operative husband who sometimes beat her etc. my initial approach was to counsel her to be more understanding as understanding him could also change him etc.

Moving from youthful enthusiasm to the hard core of the contradictions of development in terms of growth in a capitalist economy, I realised the need to understand the macro-phenomenon of the effects of capitalist development. I felt the need to interact with other people who had been engaged in grass-roots experiences. I felt the need to study more about the social process in society. I felt the need to look at developments in our country from a more global point of view. I decided to withdraw from the village and reflect.

This was after living and working for eight years in the fishing village. These first years were full of promise and success but nevertheless had raised many questions in my mind about successful micro experiences. As many friends were passing through such cross roads; I decided to go and meet them and learn from their experiences too. Grateful to friends who made this travel possible and to a male colleague who decided to travel with me the experience convinced me that no revolutionary change was imminent and that the vastness of our country's problems escaped all attempts of theoretical generalizations making the task of transformation much more remote and difficult. To add to this, the revolutionary forces themselves were in so much disarray that rays of hope had to be sought elsewhere. To my great disappointment too, I had not found in other parts of the country a group that tried to create an alternative although there was much debate and some efforts in this line. I had to fall back on my own experience too. In our group we worked as a team, in a democratic manner, humanly very close and with a great deal of debate but with no ideological snobishness. I decided to come back to the south but with a new approach in my work, conscious now of the theory



of organisation with a specific working class base and the dynamic relation between the working class organization and working class party. I had decided that this was a life time task and that a commitment to such a task cannot be an artificial one, but one tried out in the day-to-day events of life. Working as a full—timer in a voluntary organization made such a commitment artificial and my first decision was to look out for a job—a normal job which would give me a livelihood, while I took the rest of my time for a work of solidarity with the worker's struggles. Strangely enough, the job did to me things I had not bargained for or anticipated.

It was the first time I was officially employed, in an institution where all the rules of the hierarchy had to be observed. There was room for initiative but all within the framework—room for initiative but not for creativity as I soon began to realise. It was also the first time that eyebrows were raised when colleagues and friends at work realised I was unmarried. The questions that were asked were—do you have parents? What are they doing? etc. as if I had to be care of somebody and gradually I understood that conscientious parents should be able to get their daughters married of instead of letting them loose like me at a ripe old age of 32. Some even went so far as to offer to help because after all I wasn't 'an unattractive woman'! It took time for colleagues to relate to me—women colleagues swearing that I would in future regret being alone in life. Finding a house in the city as a single woman was also a problem, more so when I added that I live with others, some of them men, trying to explain the nature of our work etc.

So there was something in it after all. The Decade on Woman was on, seminars and meetings were taking place all over the country. I kept myself informed but was sure that I wanted to have nothing to do with western feminism although I wanted to know what the Indian women's movement actually focussed on. By this time there was 'Manushi' which gave an extensive coverage of issues in the country although there were no theoretical positions taken. There was the anti-price rise movement of Bombay that had mobilised vast sections of

women, there was the Forum against Rape organised in Bombay and the Women's Centre that was beginning to take roots—together with a number of other initiatives. And so I made a serious attempt to try and understand the basis and framework of the various organizational efforts. Most of this was descriptive but I found myself more open to listen. I began to discover that there was need to undo and relearn history and what I accepted as "our traditions". I began to realise that I could not find answers because they do not exist but it was necessary to understand how and why women had gradually begun to be considered the "weaker sex". I began to participate in a small discussion group on the women's question. For some time the biological argument lingered. It was initially difficult to accept that it was not the biological making of a woman that made her play the role of the inferior sex in society. But it was only when I understood the concept of patriarchy—patriarchy as determining the relations not only of reproduction but being used to further the gains of capitalism penetrating categories of race, nation, culture, production, reproduction, that I began to discover that there is a material basis to the exploitation of women in society. Although I had understood its essence, I would have to do a lot of personal work to understand its implications, history etc. It was a similar sense of realization as when I had begun to understand the Marxian analysis of society—that capitalist society is divided into classes whose interests are antagonistic and that an overthrow of capitalism could happen only when the working class gets power in its hands through a conscious process of struggle .going deeper into scientific socialism. Just as good will alone was not sufficient to change society, so also good will alone will not be sufficient to change the unjust gender relations. Hence it has to be worked out, the ideas have to spread and the strategy of struggle to change has to be built up.

And this is what I gradually got involved in sure only of one thing—that this struggle had to take place within our broader struggle for the transformation of capitalism as such.

The ball was set rolling. I explained it all to my colleagues—the women first. Most of them had the reservations that I earlier had and so I could grapple with these fears and



gradually we began to accept that we could develop our own understanding as a group and make a relevant contribution in our work. It was amazing to see the speed at which the puzzle began to sort itself out. We began to take note of the sexist jokes we laughed at and the manner in which our male colleagues unconsciously dominated us. There were times when our suggestions were passed by but seriously considered when they reappeared in the mouth of a male colleague.... this despite the fact that we are fairly 'strong' women ourselves. We also became aware of the fact that an aggressive reaction from our part did not help solve the problem because it was necessary to first get a few male colleagues to understand what exactly we were driving at even if we were not able to defend our positions all the way through. We also realised that so many of us automatically play the 'female' roles and that we too would have to consciously make efforts not to fall into such traps.

#### **And so we laid out our tasks**

1. that we would have a session together with our male colleagues to understand the concept of patriarchy and the material basis for the exploitation of women.
2. that we as a group of women animators would make a serious effort to develop our own consciousness on the issue and weave it into our organizational work.
3. that we would raise the question in the fishworkers movement with the women and develop there too a consciousness and sensibility to the issue so that creative alternatives can be worked out within the movement itself.

#### **1) Raising the question with our male colleagues**

The discussion with our male colleagues was one of the first things we did. Their agreeing to come to the discussion was kind of to please us—not condescendingly but with a certain amount of cynicism—'Let us see what is new that our women have to say' 'don't you females always have the upper hand anyway?' 'sure, what ever you say' kind of responses.

All the married women colleagues came along with their husbands. Half of them are unmarried.



We women spent the first two days together with 3 feminist friends whom we had invited. These women were instrumental in building up our understanding and sharing with us the theoretical work they had done on the subject. Most of us by this time had done some basic reading on the question. Most of us were also familiar with the marxist tools of analysis and hence it was not difficult for us to understand how patriarchy determined the relations of reproduction. Patriarchy is also present in the relations of production as class is present in the relations of production of life. We also went deeper into how patriarchy developed as such a powerful determinant of human relations realising that it was probably the first kind of domination, even before the appearance of any surplus.

We also had a session of personal sharing about handling the situations of domination in our daily lives. Change was not immediately possible then how do we pursue and sustain the struggle? This discussion prepared us for the next day with our male colleagues. We had to be tactical about it and so we planned it well. We decided first of all not to permit any 2 men to sit together—lest they pass their usual cynical remarks between them.

As part of the general introduction, the main thing we told the men was that 10—15 years ago we were unaware about the historical and scientific reasons for poverty and how it is reproduced. We had then tried to discover how systematically it can be fought. We had realised that society is divided into classes and despite the fact that we come from the middle class, we first have to make an option for the working class and gradually begin to de-class ourselves—realising that we certainly have something to lose in the process.

It is similar with the question relating to the oppression of women. It is something that is so engrained in us that we don't even see it and even if we do, we accept it as fate; the men taking their superiority as their birth right. Hence the request is to listen to those who experience this inequality, to understand its scientific and material basis and just as fighting capitalism requires a choice to be on the side of the oppressed, it will be

necessary to make a choice to join the struggle for emancipation with women, and it will be only in surrendering their material gains through patriarchy, that more equitable gender relations can take place.

Then we had a brief self introduction. The men introduced themselves by what they do 'professionally'. We introduced ourselves as persons each explaining our preoccupations as women and professionals and why we were interested to go deeper into the women's question. In the introduction itself the men realised that the women felt more free to talk of themselves as persons while as most of them could not go beyond, their 'professional' selves.

Our feminist friends then went into the theoretical framework and historical perspective of the question. Although the men did not find the historical data that was being presented entirely acceptable, they were open to the analysis but in a way totally dumb founded on hearing it. They did try very much to build up the biological argument and the specific role of mothering and fathering being specific sex roles. As there was one married man who had already begun to play 'mothering' roles with his child, he was able to disprove this argument and we were able to proceed.

This was a good beginning and took us a long way in the following years. Somethings were easy to change—there were no more sexist jokes, there was definitely more awareness and openness on the part of the men—but other things were slow and even difficult like the actual practice in reality. These two consequences made us aware of the difficulties in actually making a change possible. Men who from childhood haven't learnt to be sensitive and respond, have much to learn and it can take a lot of time and be frustrating to a woman who has become aware of her exploitations. For those men who are aware there are not often alternatives possible—like supportive structures within the means of the lower middle class. Some possibilities would be common kitchens, a possibility of living together, creches for kids etc. These are still areas in which something must happen.

## 2) The process of our own deeper awareness building

We also realised that as women we have to unlearn a number of things ourselves. For this we had made a little exercise among ourselves. Each of us filled up a questionnaire at the beginning of our discussions just to assess our consciousness at that period of time. Three years later when we had worked on the question we again answered the same questionnaire. The path we have traversed is interesting to note.

Reading the report of our first discussion it openly states that we wanted to get to know more about the history and reasons for women's oppression, but not to build up any "feminist movement."

This had a lot to do with an understanding of feminism as we had known it from the West—women's liberation. We had seen such a movement as against men and this was not what we wanted to build up. On the other hand, the women libbers that we had come across in our own country struck us as very middle class and Western. We wanted to emphasise the aspect of rights for women. None of us was really aware of the women's movement that was gradually growing in the country. None of us had tried to understand the role women had played in the various struggles in our own country. We were open and were starting from scratch. So we decided to go into it systematically: a process of undoing our own inhibitions and fears, demystifying all the mysteries of 'tradition', building up a creative process among ourselves, enhancing our knowledge on the question and gradually to spread the new values and knowledge.

The next step was to talk about ourselves as women. It was revealing to realise that we knew so little of each other's personal biographies despite the fact that we were working together for a few years already. (We were all middle class women, only 2 from the fishing community in all). And so the sharing of our response to the questionnaire revealed that in childhood there were certainly differences in the way our parents brought us up as daughters vis a vis our brothers. When mother needed any help etc., it was always her daughters she called,



There was equal opportunity for both (as is usual in middle class families—schooling etc.) but things began to change when we attained puberty. Most of us had been prepared for puberty, some by mother, others by friends. Although none of us reacted to this negatively or with difficulty, some of us felt very angry at the way it was made public. A couple of us felt happy to think that it was now time to grow into motherhood. Most of us felt very strongly how suddenly sanctions were “imposed on us once we had come of age—“don’t go out and play with the boys”, “you shouldn’t climb trees or cycle now”, “you should be in before dark”, “you should not go out alone.” None of our brothers were given such instruction. None of us really rebelled against it. Most of us had an equally good relationships with our fathers and mothers except one whose father was drinking in excess. All our mothers were seen as appendages of our fathers although our mothers were educated, capable women but confined to the home, caring for all the household burdens. None of us had reacted to the fact that our fathers did not share an inch of house work but two of us had reacted to the fact that our fathers while ‘respecting’ our mothers were cynical about their opinions. To our knowledge none of our mothers were physically oppressed in marriage although 2 of us came from large families—9 and 11 children. All of us had the opportunity of doing what we had wanted in terms of our futures—but again we had all taken up lines that women ‘normally’ take up—teaching, social work, nursing, secretarial work—and in deciding about our futures too—except for one who was pressurised to get married but was free to choose her own husband. The others who had married had chosen their own husbands, 3 had become religious sisters, the others were unmarried—one living independently of her family.

None of us had ever felt sad for being a woman although we had envied the freedom of our brothers; some of us also enjoying their ‘protection’ and concern especially some of us who were unmarried. One of us had only a very young brother and she was considered the ‘son’ of the family.

None of us had felt that men have any innate superior qualities to women. They “prove themselves better” because

they benefit from the sense of freedom that they enjoy. On the contrary all of us felt that women seem to have some innate qualities that men do not have because of the experience of child bearing and motherhood. Whether this is innate or acquired we were not able to decide. They seemed to be more patient, more caring, more creative, more sensitive to the feelings of others, more sharing too. All of us felt that we as women have our specific contributions to make in our work areas and most had felt that the men always get the better of a situation and in a way we tend to give in sometimes happy to rely on the men. We were amazed at our own 'lack of awareness' at these moments. This exercise also made us realise how we try to play down ourselves as persons in our professional involvement just because 'work' is important. More so when we are committed to the struggle of the working class, we are meant to be continuously productive, forgetting often the fact that the struggle is to create a more human society and losing our humaneness in the struggle. It was clear that we had to live up to the men's expectations—the fact that we had to put added effort for work in the field because our male colleagues had so many 'theoretical' and 'serious' things to do. So much so we had not stopped to think either about how we were manipulated or what specifically we had to contribute—the 'struggle' being most important. Of course we have to add here that the men who were genuinely involved in the struggle did not look at us as objects to be used, shall we say there was an 'attitude of respect' if one can use such a word.

For those of us who were married, the question of the household was indeed a burden. Some of us (except for one) felt that this was the lot of a mother since it is the mother who easily responds to the child. We were not willing to accept at that moment how women are dependant on the motherhood role because it is most often her only or main source of identity. Later this changed significantly.

For those of us who were single but lived in a household with men, we began to realise that men use this as a convenient arrangement (strange that when we decided to live separately,

the women continued to live in a house of many females, but the men all went their individual ways—living in rooms.) The married women certainly felt that their involvement in action was very much curtailed because of the responsibility of child rearing when the husband does not fully share in the task. And generally all women's action involvements are restricted by other constraints like the fear to be out alone after dark and being unable to live alone etc. None of us had any fear about us. Some of the unmarried women mentioned the pressures of others to force them to marry seeing spinsterhood as a social insecurity.

As mentioned earlier, this kind of sharing gave us a sense of oneness, a new kind of strength and we felt we really wanted to go into this with earnestness.... looking at our work, our contribution to society, the meaning of 'transformation' of society with this new dimension.

Then, among ourselves we decided to do more reading and continued to meet twice a month for about a year to continue our exchange. We again went into a discussion on our understanding of the family. Here again we filled in a questionnaire.

1. What do you think about the present nuclear family?
2. How do you see it in relation to today's society?
3. Do you think women should have relations with more than one man?
4. What do you consider the best kinship group in society?

The general conclusions were that the present nuclear family is a result of growing urbanization and the breaking up of the joint family. This has both its advantages and disadvantages. While it gives woman a role in decision making—unlike subjecting her to the domination of the in-laws (mother-in-law at that) it increases her burdens of the household and the care of the children. In the middle class this can force even a professionally trained woman to stay at home and the capitalist



concept of housewifization develops—also as an ideology—providing security and a ‘good life’ for a woman. It develops isolation of the woman too and privitization in general. It is not something those in the group desired, but they did not see ways of changing it for the obvious reason that the aspect of privitization was so deeply ingrained.

Regarding a woman having relations with more than one man—all felt that a woman should be free enough to relate to as many people as she needed to. In marriage this can cause problems if it threatens the existing husband-wife relationship. Sexual relations outside marriage were felt problematic and therefore undesirable.

All except one of us felt the ideal kinship group is one with a larger group of friends who share a similar ideology. The family could be part of this larger group but it could also be extremely limiting.

We wondered whether it could be possible to further this discussion on family between the married couples, (because the married women felt that there are aspects of married life that unmarried women could not understand) but this has never materialised because of lack of will.

Now after 5 years and answering again the old questionnaire we find we have gone a vey long way. We seem to have passed through an initially aggressive phase into a phase of greater confidence which seems to reflect in our work together and sense of participation. All of us have made efforts to relate to the larger women’s movements in the country and to raise the question at the various levels at which we work. Our consciousness has also changed our method of working with women in the fishing community as will be explained in the latter part of the essay.

We have begun to realise that no relations can be taken for granted and though daily life situations change only very gradually, the change is nevertheless on the move once we are conscious of the problem.

One very important factor has been the manner in which the reflection on this problem has made us look at many burning issues of today—the housing questions and slum evictions, the legal structure of our country, the communal forces, the health system, the energy crisis the environmental questions: looking at these questions from a perspective in which women matter, gives them a new focus and raises new strategies for struggle.

At another level, it was not very difficult to start this discussion among the young women who came from the fishing community itself, those who had benefited from some education (up till high school some of them) and who were very active in the mobilization of the fish workers. They had already begun to feel the difficulties of working—of being accepted in the field and so this discussion was like a lighted match on a hay stack.

We did this through many sessions, introduction, sharing of personal biographies—filling in the same questionnaire—and preparing simple papers on the historical evolution of women's roles in the production process—and the biological arguments that foster the ideology that woman is the weaker sex. There were many differences in the answers to the question (from those of the middle class women). Right from the start the stress in being different from the sons was felt but accepted. Although as young girls they all had a possibility to go to school, none of them was encouraged to proceed further. Their brothers went to sea. After puberty there were all kinds of restrictions on what they could and couldn't do. Being poor, they were expected to abide more strictly by the tradition—as the rich could do as they liked. Some of them mentioned how gradually the mothers handed over the responsibilities of their daughters, to the sons. Hence forward, everything she did had to be with the permission of her brother. Most of them resented this. One of them had a brother who was a marxist and she said he gave her much freedom and he tried to break the adherence to tradition in the family. Two of them were either the eldest of many or had no brother. They became the breadwinners of the family. At a very early age the responsibility of the family fell on them.

All of them were closer to their mothers and had a very impersonal relation with their fathers. They admired their

mothers who struggled hard to vend fish and make some money to make both ends meet. They could not imagine how their homes would run in the absence of their mothers. Yet their fathers were the head of the household, were the last word on all important decisions—even in cases where their fathers were dependent on their mothers. Many of them had seen their mothers ill-treated by their fathers and while being angry with their father they had never been able to intervene.

Some of them were shocked and very shy when they came of age, others had expected it but in no cases had their mothers spoken to them about it. They had learnt about it from their friends. All of them had felt very angry that they were women. They realised that their futures could be seen only in the light of a man. Although most of them would like to be married because its a stigma to remain single, there are problems because of dowry. Those who where married had no freedom to choose their own men except one of them and she had separated because finally the dowry question was raised by her in-laws. None of them had faced physical violence in marriage.

Many of them spoke about the reluctance of their families to let them work in the organizational field. In the initial stages there were many restrictions, but gradually seeing that they were serious and confident, they gave up imposing their restrictions. But all of them had fears about travelling or going places alone. All of them had bad experiences of men following them, teasing them etc. and they were dead scared. But they felt that they had to fight it. All of them expressed the strength they got from coming together and their desire to learn more about the women's question. All of them had earlier felt that the problem of inequality had a biological base and it was because of this that all through the ages men have dominated.

Subsequently, these young women began to read, raise many questions and try to express their points of view in their work with male colleagues. Many of them had faced bitter experiences for raising the question in the field and by giving



the feeling that they could not be dominated. Hence two years later when all of them sat together to evaluate what steps they had taken in this line, they were all amazed at the distance we had all travelled.

Just as earlier mentioned that building awareness on this issue has had an impact on the lives of the middle class women, so has also been the case with these young women who continue to live in their villages and pursue an active involvement in the broader struggle of the fishworkers. Most of these young women have fought the pressure of marriage and stigma of not being married.... not that they have chosen to remain unmarried but because the existing circumstances like the possibility to choose a boy they like, or sufficient economic independence, do not permit it. Most of them have developed a great closeness to women in distress and this has given them a very mature attitude in their work together. The spirit of solidarity and support has given them greater courage and impetus in their work and it is striking to see such young women launch into daring organizational programmes and taking up local issues. Despite their limited formal education—many of them without a school final—they are interested by the larger questions and seriously read and inform themselves as each one feels deeply she has something to contribute to society and must take her responsibility for the same. A group of them had also made a trip to central India to meet other women similarly involved and get a feel of the women's movement in other parts of the country. This assured them that they are indeed a part of the much larger movement. Linking up with the larger movement has been a natural development of this process.

When we read back and see that our initial ideas were opposed to identifying ourselves with 'the feminist movement' we now admit that growing feminist consciousness is itself such a liberating process that it cannot but begin to influence and change all processes with which such women interact.



## A REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

The organizational methods based on the consciousness at various stages.

**The initial organizational method was to help build local women's organizations.** It was extremely clear that women in the fishing community—although they play an important role in the village economy—are kept out of any decision making roles (as explained in the exposure of work in Marianad.)

Empowering women, at that time, meant:

1. Women should be able to come together
2. Have time to talk about other things than the daily domestic chores.
3. Raise and discuss the issues that affected them as workers at the local level and thereby enhance their own knowledge on such issues.
4. Set up their own local organizations which would be a schooling in execution of action and an experience of democratic decision making.

How did this happen?

Women animators, through personal contacts with women and listening to various problems women voiced, stimulated the need for women to come together if at all they wanted to find an answer to their problems. Women are initially willing to talk about their problems on an individual level or together informally around the well or when they go to answer the calls of nature. The only other formal getting together would be under the auspices of the Church—to pray etc. But when they are



helped to see that the individual problems are not strictly individual problems, that they somehow link up with other people, with other larger problems, then they begin to see the meaning of getting together.

Once women begin to come together—some of them spontaneously drop out because they either feel there are no attractive gains or because they are more reluctant to enter group process. Some of them genuinely feel enthused by a new platform at which they can give expression to some of their suppressed talents—interested to know more and participate more. It was no doubt important to sustain this interest and the future of any local group depends not only on the dynamism of its members but the on-going processes, that evolve to sustain interest. This is particularly important because the experience of any local group is that there are spontaneous negative reactions from the surrounding once a women's group is born. No matter how small a group therefore, the urge to get involved in action is imminent and the success of any group is its ability to maintain the right balance between action, reflection and group process. This latter relates to the functioning methods that help members participate and grow.

As a rule women gather then once a month, electing a committee. Again the interest of the committee members and the ability of the animator to enhance at each stage their interest to pursue questions, makes for the effectivity of the group.

The monthly meetings of the general body, are around different subjects—handled by the committee who would have prepared the agenda. Having to handle a topic is initially very difficult but gradually women begin to be able to give the *pros and cons* of a particular issue, to elicit discussion, to moderate a discussion, to make concluding remarks, to keep notes of discussions in order to be able to report back.

Observing this growth process among the so called illiterate women is itself an enriching experience and helps build a faith that women can make it, given the opportunity. They are not unable or weak or reluctant.

It is interesting to recall here how the women from Marianad went to speak with women in other villages. How they encouraged them also to get together and not only tackle their local problems but to learn more about the society in which they live. It was these women who then urged that the local women's groups also meet together and this was the second step of the organizational process.

The first phase of work among women had certainly helped them develop their own self activity, the confidence that they can do things for themselves and develop the skills to do so. It is quite accepted in our working group that these autonomous activities of women should be sustained not to isolate women from men or to keep men away but to provide the experimental or training ground for women to break out of their initial shackles and see if they can evolve among themselves new approaches of working together to change the imbalances of power in society.

### **Linking up the local initiatives**

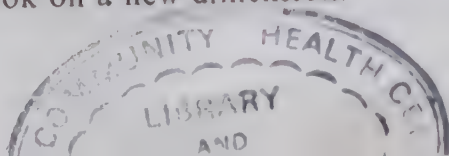
It was these women's groups, on coming together, who decided to take up the issue of transport facilities to the market. In Kerala, where public transport reaches every nook and corner of the State, there was discrimination against women fish vendors. (It is an interesting phenomenon to see that in the 60's the transport buses facilitated individuals to take with them manageable quantities of merchandise. Gradually, and apparently due to the fact that conductors and drivers have higher education—often being graduates—the buses are reserved only for passengers—leaving the toiling artisans to hire other transport but never at any phase have fish vendors been permitted on the public transport with their 'smelly' fish.) When the women realised that they too had a right to public transport, they decided to demand a statutory order for the same.

### **The Demands of the new task**

Seeing that women were determined to take up a larger issue which would require an agitational role as well—empowering women to face this task took on a new dimension.

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- mobilization was the main task.
- ability to communicate an issue and carry the argument to a logical end
- shifting the location of action from the local to the district level
- moving out of local areas and familiar ground to other villages and areas for demonstrations etc.
- the confidence and consciousness that they as a class would have to struggle if at all they wanted to demand rights now in control of the ruling classes.
- the need therefore to take sides, to make differences, understanding the interests of each class.

It was the first time in the history of the fish workers that either women or men demonstrated in public and demanded from government a right. Accustomed only to listening to politicians come and make great promises at the time of election campaigns, the people had not realised that they had any more say in the government other than casting a vote for the politician they thought would deliver the goods.

Hence mobilization for their rights was a new phase, of consciousness in enhancing their own lot. This phase brought new experiences, although the struggles had limited success. The women were not granted permission to ride on State public transport, but the fisheries department organized separate transport for women fish vendors. Although this succeeded in retaining the stigma about the 'dirty and smelly fisher women', it was the only practical solution.

Women learnt a great deal. First of all that they could get together for a purpose. This was not an easy process. The demand was a felt need but how could it be realised! How does a demand get represented to government? So basic data had to be collected... the statistics regarding the fish vendors, the markets and the market routes, the existing facilities and how they could be enhanced, the basis on which the demand is expressed—why is it their right and then their slogans had to be



worked out. Then the organisational details—willingness to forfeit work in order to demonstrate and meet the officials etc. willingness to collect funds for posters and other expenses. Yes, 'the struggle is the school for the development of class consciousness'—was experienced in its essence. Women saw how the politicians they had voted into power treated them when they approached them in their official chambers. They saw how there were loop holes to escape out of everything in the bureaucracy. They realised that somehow the entire system is interconnected. To fight it is the only way out. It is a hard long struggle. Those who feel overwhelmed by it withdrew. But others are goaded on by the hurdles and so the leadership, the militant women stand out. They become the mainstay of the movement. They want to learn, participate and go ahead. It is they who plunge in whole heartedly into the larger fishworkers struggle spreading fire among the others. It is interesting to see here how very different personalities come into the forefront not necessarily women who are concerned with details, process etc. but women of daring will to make a speech, willing to rouse other women confident about doing things that they have never done before, not hesitant to lead a demonstration shouting forceful slogans etc. The same problem of maintaining a balance between action, reflection and process continues to be the crux of the organizational process although the parameters are wider.

It must be mentioned here that it was the women who first mobilised and went out on demonstrations and representations to the government before the men. So much so that in the following years, when the large fish workers struggle took place, women were in the forefront—not only in the forefront of the struggle but in the organising of actual task as well. It is true that they were obliged to play also the service roles but it was obvious that the militancy of the struggle was a result of their active and committed participation.

It is interesting to see how minimum successes lead them into further struggles against exploitative unjust market taxes, lack of proper facilities in the markets, lack of facilities at the local government hospitals, absence of teachers at the local government schools etc, And so the movement evolves not

without its difficulties. The main problems are firstly to sustain the struggle and secondly to deepen the class consciousness, going beyond mere trade union demands. A significant problem is the growth of each individual in the process all the human difficulties of an activist.

**Women as Workers, Women as wives, mothers and half the human race.**

So, right from the start the issues relating to women and their work were taken up. Although we had quite a detailed analysis of the sector, of the division of male and female roles we had not understood how the ideology of patriarchy penetrated to maintain these divisions to the advantage of the men. We too had accepted things as given—a little more freedom and democracy was what was needed—and this consciousness seemed to mark our original approach. Questions from our feminist friends like “why don’t women go fishing”, “why don’t women cycle to the market instead of walking miles?”, we would have earlier turned down as “intellectual theorising—utopian ideas.” But they gradually became serious questions—Yes, it seemed to be true that because the men owned the means of production, they seemed to have the right over women that too in an economy where the women are an integral, part of the extended production process. It is the women who realised the monetary value of the fish caught, it is they who mainly lend and borrow money, ie manage the household economics—borrow when needed, lend when in excess as storage is a problem and make an advantage out of it. It is they who keep the family going in lean seasons—going to various markets to procure fish, selling it and bringing back food for the household.

In Trivandrum District, the women’s contribution to the household income is not marginal. It is substantial—especially at the stage of subsistence—rather when production itself did not involve costs and when human labour was the main component in production—together with traditional craft and gear. Shifting from this kind of subsistence production to a slightly higher degree of modernization has affected the status of women in two ways. (will go into this later). If this be the reality, why is primacy given to male work? Why is the entire household



the responsibility of the women when she works for as many hours as the man in an equally strenuous job. (Carrying heavy loads of fish and walking with it 10-20 km. a day) What is this tradition that keeps women out of social life in the community? All these unwritten laws that tell her what she should or should not do, that finally make her less than men? Yes finally, why don't women go fishing? Why don't they go to the market on cycles? These became our queries too and it was suddenly not difficult to find out why. We began to find explanations, rather than to take things as given. We began to see the penetration of patriarchy into all aspects of life, finally working out to the advantage of men. Just as it had taken us time to understand that society was divided into classes which had contradictory interests and the richer class finally dominating production in the capitalist system, so also it began to dawn on us that patriarchy divided human kind into male and female, assigning through its all pervasive ideology the control of the reproduction of life to the male who thereby has control and the right over the female's sexuality, procreativity and labour. The fact that women are considered the 'weaker sex' putting forward the biological argument of the functioning of her anatomy, has been a well entrenched argument. This once again relegates the fact that women are exploited to the level of the superstructure, culture, ideology etc. But gradually we began to realise that it is not so. Patriarchy in the fishing community has a strong material base, it has definite advantages for men who under no circumstances are willing to give up their privileges and who use all forms of violence to maintain their control.

In my 18 years of association with the fishing community of Trivandrum District I have seen the community pass through two quite distinct phases of development.

The first as an artisanal community—skilled and lucrative employment—but at a level of subsistence. Working hours outside the home have been equally strenuous and long for both men and women. Rewards in terms of cash have been complementary—not that women 'substituted' the income but that they were part of the production process and their contribution to household income was substantial as that of the men. It is at this phase



that 'tradition', 'culture' and 'ideology' maintain the relation of dominance of the male over female.... all the rules apply to her, what she should and should not do even if she feels otherwise. So right from childhood the socialization process begins with very clear ideology—he has to go to sea, he is the bread winner, his work is hard. Therefore he has to eat the better portions of food, he is excluded from household chores, he needs relaxation and a drink because of the nature of his work, sex is his right and she has to be constantly at his disposal—after all isn't it that which the marriage oath demands, hasn't it all been said in the Bible in the words of St. Paul! So that is her fate and the easier she accepts it, the quicker are her rewards from heaven.

At this phase dowries are low but the marriage transaction is in terms of equipment. He inherits his father-in law's equipment, he comes to live in her village or house and she then becomes care-of-him in her own native village.

In the second phase—modernization comes in, costs increase in production but then earnings also increase (although not proportionately)—or young men look for jobs outside fishing, many of them dreaming to go to the gulf.

In this phase, two things happen to the women. For those men who make it, the demand for large dowries increases, cash and gold and even land form a part of the dowry. He promises to earn sufficient money to maintain her as a housewife—to look after his home and his children. She then begins to be confined to the home and the middle—class housewifical ideology predominates. For everything she requires his permission—even to get out of the house. He becomes her protector. In some cases it remains a 'peaceful' relationship but in most cases he tends to use his muscle power whenever she dares or tries to express or even assert herself. She loses her freedom of mobility, her economic freedom and even her freedom of expression in the name of him being able enough to care for her.

In other cases, where he does not make it—her burden is all the more hard. She has to make up economically, all that he loses through his investments.... this because there are added

costs in motorised fishing. To make up economically becomes more and more difficult because of the phenomenon of fish depletion. Over the years the burden of fish vending has increased. Because of scarcity women have to travel to more distant areas even to get fish. This forces them even to be away from home for three days to a week at a time. They either have to shift their area of operation to the larger fish landing centres or go there to buy fish in bulk. The larger the cash deficits in the home, the larger must she gain in business. But it is the same routine all over again at home. Whether she is a housewife or continues to earn the daily bread, she remains under his control. Continuing to work gives her a little more freedom of mobility and a little more economic control but no freedom to associate where she wills and to him she does belong.

And so it was time we raised these questions with the women and what we discovered was so revealing that we were surprised by our own ignorance all these years, realising that any struggle for change would necessarily have to include a change in these patriarchal relations as well.

I remember the first time I went into this aspect with a women's group. One woman reported that she had not come to the last meeting because she was recovering from literally being kicked by her husband.

"Why did he do that?"

"Oh he was drunk?"

"And so he just beat you?—what did he want?"

"What else does he want do you think? And I have decided not to take it any more. I am tired and fed up of all these pregnancies—even ashamed that I still have children after having grand children" etc. etc.

And so we went into a long discussion in which everybody participated. There was nobody in the group who had not been beaten (and all were fish vendors). There was nobody who felt they were necessarily dependent on their husbands. But all said this is the fate of women and so there is no need to rebel.

That's just how it is. This discussion took up the major part of a regular monthly meeting. At the next month's meeting where the former meeting's minutes are read—this entire discussion was left out. On asking them why, they all felt that this is a private, personal matter and should not go on record. And it remained a disputed question as to whether or not it should.

What gradually began to surface through such discussions with similar groups of women was that men did not just beat their women as a mere result of intoxication. They beat their women when they refuse them sex. Women refuse for a number of obvious reasons, they are extremely tired and worn out, they really get from it no pleasure, the men are rough and very cruel. The excuse they sometime give the men is, what will the children think—because of the lack of privacy. But the men could not care—less of course. Then again, it is quite a common phenomenon that in old age the old man and woman divide themselves between two children. We had earlier felt that this was a convenient economic arrangement. Only later did we realise that the old man never gets too tired or too old for sex and makes demands on his old wife who feels she has had enough of it and decides to live separate.

Similarly, we initially used to get quite mixed up in understanding a husband-wife relationship.... a kind of love-hate relationship. There would be a loud quarrel at night, the women being beaten, then the man would walk off and not return for a couple of days and she would go to woo him back. Some women who had too much of physical torture would let him go and would sense a feeling of freedom once he was away. Those who went to woo him back would feel guilty for not giving him his right and they would feel sorry for this. Only then would we realise that the reason for the quarrel was the fact that she had refused him sex.

On the birth control issue—the reaction we always got was, that it was a sin. Seeing women worn out by the age of 35—having borne 5—6 children by then, with possibly more pregnancies, we tried to talk about methods of family planning. In some desperate cases the women took the pill without the knowledge of her husband because otherwise 'he will kill me'. Was



it really the fact that it was a sin or was it again unconscious patriarchal control over her sexuality and fertility. Unconscious because it has been communicated through the ideological frame—for the fishing community, through the church which has the sole monopoly of interpreting the 'Word of God', and quite literally at that when and where it suits them.

How surprising it was when slide shows on the reproduction system were conducted for these women. How little they knew of their own bodies, and how much they had experienced pain and suffering because of their bodies. No woman had said there was 'love' in marriage—marriage was a part of life, if one can be happy its one's luck otherwise its part of the drudgery of life like the struggle for survival.

As part of the larger educational programme, a series of one and two day seminars were organized for women. First at the local level with women from neighbouring villages coming together and then at a district level.

Various issues were discussed like

- the problems that women continue to face in the market places.
- harassment from men merchants
- harassment from tax collectors
- selling fish in very unhygienic surroundings
- no proper latrine or water facilities for women.

On most of these issues women were able to find some ways to take corrective action. Getting some success depended on their ability to demand it together. This becomes difficult in the market where the overriding atmosphere is one of competition. At the start, the women were unable to see anything untoward in it. After all competition is a part of life—it only reveals one's ability. Things only go wrong when despite one's ability, survival becomes a problem. Then one can search for deeper causes of the disease of poverty. In frustration, the pressures of the competitive process make woman break out in abusive language and indulge in underhand ways, much of it which they try to justify.

Such discussions only penetrated as far as generalizations about the capitalist system, which is profit oriented and where free competition is a legitimate norm. This was very easy to juxtapose with accepted christian values—why Jesus had said it was difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God—not because he idealised poverty but because the rich are the cause for oppression and poverty which in itself is a sin and the ways to richness being basically inhuman. It was not possible to go into the deeper aspect of the market and commodity production.

Regarding the harassment from men—the women started off by chiding themselves and each other saying that we instigate the men and we could moralise on these aspects for a while. But going deeper, was the fact that certain women were able to get on with the men, where they pacified them, giving them money for tea etc. or giving them the feeling that they were submissive to them—willing to flirt a little too. Again—most saw this as part of the game. But what is behind the game—the men have to be the boss of the show. Some so-called market chiefs even make their living in this way not doing a piece of physical labour themselves. (Even in places like Mangalore where women are large whole-sale merchants—selling fish with a dignity and kind of professionalism unseem in Kerala, the market ‘supervisors’ (self appointed) are men who take their daily cut. Such women are criticised by other women for their closeness to those ‘dirty vulgar men’. Although I did not have the rapport to interview such women, it is probably because they find it the only way to survive—keeping the vulgar men happy and getting away with minor flirtations)

#### 4. Women against rape

Rape within marriage is an old experience for women in the fishing community but has only very recently surfaced as a problem for discussion. Strangely enough, the phenomenon of biological over-fishing is also referred to as the raping of the sea and is a result of the capitalist profit orientation of present industrial society. The understanding of this biological phenomenon of over-fishing has been the fourth stage of the

evaluation of our consciousness and we have tried to raise it in the movement.

- the problem of fish scarcity
- leading to more strenuous burden for women
- to insecurity for the future.

These again are very involved discussions and although the initial discussions were related to disturbance of the ecosystem by the trawlers, we gradually moved to the resource as such—the biological resources which has to be replenished and conserved. But the latter approach still has to be developed. Until now all fishworkers believe that the resource is limitless and that it is taken away from them by the mechanised boats. We have not gone into the manner in which nature is raped and then left sterile.

I personally feel that these two phenomena are very closely related and our means to combat them will therefore also be related. I recall here the emotional stand taken at an international conference by the wives of the small fishermen in the advanced fishing nations. They were expressing the insupportable pressure—economic, social, and psychological that they were being forced into by the fact that their husbands are now forced to grow larger and go further away to fish just to survive. Our women, listening to them, tried to encourage them by saying—“don’t cry over it, get together and fight it”. Little do our women realise that the marginalised are so powerless in the developed countries that they cannot fight it. On the other hand, the marginalised in India have the force of sheer numbers and can dare to fight it.

Against her will and against her ability to resist or sustain the pressure is the manner in which the present society forces men to relate both to their women and the sea. As the sea cannot consciously respond, it is the women, who knowing what it means to be raped, who, will have to build up the consciousness to protect her in the movement.

It is an extremely difficult step—just as the resource demand backfires on the traditional fishermen themselves the struggle



against sexual exploitation backfires against the women within the larger struggle. The process will have to be gradual and strategically planned.

The initial steps have been made

- 1) at the level of health and women
- 2) at the level of understanding the life of the sea.

Just as the women and men know so little about the actual functioning of their bodies—whose physical strength they are so dependent on, they seem to know so little about the life in the sea—the resource of their sustenance.

### **Some useful lessons**

The lessons learnt in the process of organizational work are numerous. I highlight only significant ones that are relevant here.

#### **1. Some positive aspects in working with women :**

Having worked both amidst committees of men and women in the fishing community at the level of their local organizations I have this to say about how different they are, and may focus areas on which to build.

The common feature is that responsibility and opportunity bring out the best in people, and people who have not benefited by any 'official' education, have a tremendous capacity for reason, logic and common sense. To move to a level of conceptualization is a slower process but is a possibility.

It was my experience that women interacted much more between themselves not shying away from 'sensitive' issues that needed to be thrashed out between themselves. Men on the contrary prefer to interact with the functionary of the organization and even if they interact among themselves, it will be mainly on issues more distant from themselves. Men easily avoid 'sensitive' issues and in a way one always has to be able to know what is behind 'his mind when he speaks'.

Men seem to take off at a less 'enthusiastic rate' than women do. Once women have seen a point, understood it, then there seems no way to keep them from going ahead. They do

not seem to see unnecessary barriers that keep them back. Men, in the process of weighing the pros and cons, may even drop the issue. This gets interpreted as women being emotional and jumping into things. All involvement requires an emotional content without which evasion and lethargy set in.

This probably has to do with the fact that men are unaccustomed or unsure in their dealings on the land. Counteracting the forces of nature at sea is different from counteracting the man-made forces on land. How often does it happen that a man can come back with little or no catch. That is a question of 'luck'! But a woman's success at market depends on her ability—a bad deal today has to compensate with added profits tomorrow. She *has* to make it.

When asking why the men's committee of the co-operatives find it so difficult sometimes to discuss issues of general importance, not directly related to the immediate routine activities of the co-operatives, the answer one gets is that there are so many practical things to do that there is never time for anything else. This may be true to some extent but the fact is also that if any such attempts are made, men recoil into being mere listeners without entering into the discussion themselves. One cannot expect otherwise too. Men are so preoccupied with the tasks of daily physical renewal—going to sea, getting back to eat and rest, waking to darn nets and prepare for the next day, at the most a game of cards and liquor, retiring home to sleep after being duly serviced in sex by the wife. Women too are bogged down to face demands for survival but their field is more diverse and complex. She is always treading on unfamiliar ground—walking to market, interacting with buyers and sellers and facing other forces, seeing a multiplicity of things on the way.... the daily changes in the world around her. When given a chance to talk about them therefore, she has questions, she has her reactions to feed back, she wants to know.

The men tend to be more manipulative in their dealing too—the shortest cut to getting things done. They would like to operate and be as effective as other kinds of social leadership they see around—village leaders, politicians and the like. Women on the other hand exhibit no scheming tactics—they plan and

move ahead gradually, if they do not succeed—there is no talk of ‘saving face’—they are probably so used to being considered ‘useless’ that its not a slap in the face if they actually fail. They do not hesitate to try again.

One interesting thing is the value men give to their time if they have to attend committee meetings or go out on organizational business.... then their “precious” work-time is lost, they have to be compensated. There is no such thing for the women. The work time women lose by coming to a meeting they make up by over work before or after. They don’t demand compensation as they are never compensated for anything at other times in life.

## 2. The problems of leadership

This is an aspect that all organizational work has to confront and something that we have found quite difficult to tackle. From our own experience, we have always undertaken responsibility as a team.... each of us having different abilities and each contributing ones best. There may be a certain woman who is responsible for the task, but the task as such has always been a combined effort. This manner of functioning has nothing to do with what is institutionally called decentralization or delegation of responsibility – which happens to be very capitalistic in its outcome. Co-responsibility seems to express better our manner of operation—an effort to be democratic—which we accept can be very difficult. Our manner of working with women’s committees was and has been similar but to our dismay we began to notice that this has different effects in reality.

1. that some women, who are more gifted and whose abilities unravel in the course of action, turn hostile to the movement or withdraw from active participation once they are no more on the committee. Somehow all the knowledge they may have imbibed, once in the movement, can be used contra the movement and they appear lost to the cause. It could be that destructive elements in society wait to use disappointed egos (egos that naturally develop and which can be positive in the course of action) or could it be that human beings crave for



power and hence want every opportunity to wield it? we do not know but we are still grappling with this problem.

2. Women are used to an approach of co-responsibility at the local level. This means that the atmosphere of give-and-take, depending on their time availability, is always respected which in its turn brings out the best in each of them. They prove to be so understanding, so capable etc. but what happens when these same women come into a platform where there are the men as well, like for instance, the fishworkers union. Why do so few women come to leadership positions—even shy away from the committees? This has been discussed at length too. It is not that women feel inadequate of their own—it is because they are made to feel so, especially in the initial stages when they just begin to find their way at the mixed committees—there are always some men who feel as inadequate as the women, but they are not criticized for their silence etc. Secondly, women are conscious that they may not be able to attend all committee meetings, a) because they are late at night b) because far away from their homes. For the men, these are not problems.

Hence it was suggested to the union committee that 1) more women representatives are taken on the committee so that at least some are present when others are unable to attend. 2) that there be a possibility of representation by rotation being assured that women automatically would take care of co-ordination among themselves.

Both these suggestions were initially rejected firstly because the men claimed that leadership, which requires conceptual and ideological growth, cannot take place like this and secondly because men felt that the demands women were making could not be substantiated to their satisfaction. We have not yet found a workable solution.

### 3. Raising the question of patriarchy

The immediate response of those of us women who become aware of the material basis of female exploitation, is to develop an aggressive anti-male attitude. Reacting then to occasions of male domination as we see it, we are unable to carry across

the logical arguments and then get even more forcefully booed down by the men. On the other hand, men will continuously take the scornful attitude no matter how logically women try to put forward a point. One probable way to overcome this is to raise the question at sessions specifically devoted to the topic. In this way, time is taken to build up and explain the point leaving room for personal doubts and sharings. At the same time there is the time to explain that there are a large number of unavoidable gaps in the understanding of her—story as the only document we have in hand today is his—story and even that has many versions.

Raising the question among men or women calls for the same caution.

### **Celebrations**

The women's day celebrations were occasions at which women were generally introduced to the larger questions that women face in society. Women's day celebrations among us have been more at the educational level, women meeting and sharing experiences and time together. No public demonstrations have ever been held as women are always involved in agitation for the trade union demands. Looking back at these celebrations also reveals the process we have travelled in our consciousness.

In 1981 as one part of the celebrations, we had sent an article to the press on the problems women face in society and announcing the March 8th celebrations. The papers only announced the meeting and left the article out. At the meeting the topic for discussion was *The Role of Women in Modern Society*. The input was poor but discussion among women was lively. This was accompanied by a visual exhibition of the evolution of the role of women through the development of society and statistics of the present status of women. Here the theme developed was Engel's thesis—the subjugation of women as a result of the development of private property.

In 1982—the theme was the evolution of the family. We had read a few books on the evolution of the family and had worked out a paper ourselves. There was a drama to enact this

and then the reading of the paper in groups. Once the sacredness of the family was touched it was difficult to deepen the issue. There was such resistance on the part of the women themselves and lack of thrust from the part of us who organized it, that it was difficult to give any concluding summary etc.

In 1983—the women's Day Celebration turned quite emotional, as we ourselves were growing more sensitive to women's problem. The number of desertions in marriage with no other resort for women began to strike us hard. The theme chosen was therefore on legislation pertaining to protecting the rights of women and legal aid at her disposal.

As the subject was handled efficiently by a woman advocate the women flooded her with questions and began to speak about their own problems—making the exchanges emotional and unweildy. This seemed to touch them very deeply and moved us all to want to really support women who faced all kinds of cruelty in marriage. As a result of this we found a couple of women choosing to live away from their cruel husbands as they are anyway economically independent and others taking the maintenance in separation seriously. Most of the issues were taken up independently as we lacked the infrastructure to take them up organizationally. Here again was a question of our priorities. We seemed to have our hands too full with questions related to the other issues in the fishing community, that to take up the specifically women's issues became difficult.

In 1984, we felt that more women should have the chance to participate and instead of having the celebration at one central location, we decided to have it at local village areas. We worked out a series of slides on the working day of a woman fish vender from dawn to dusk—just to highlight the burden the women carry and to raise the question about its justification. It was interesting to see how the women identified with this series but it did not seem to stir the fire we had expected. 'Yes, so it is', 'what can be done about it?' It hit us too—'what can be done about it?' And this question remains with us. Women seem to have either a reservoir of moral strength and courage to take it all or they are so insecure that they develop a masochist attitude.



No, the latter is not true, for while women rebel deep down, they realise there are no ready made alternatives. It is one thing to be conscious and gradually build the resistance not to totally give in. It is another thing to rebel and walk out. In the latter case survival becomes difficult because of lack of support structures. So 1984 took us a long way ahead but it also highlighted the limits to change. Nevertheless the 1985 celebration exhibited that women had grown further. This time they all came with their own songs and plays communicating what was deepest in their hearts—daring to sing and express themselves—expression that were quite militant to some filled with sarcasm and humour. This was preceded by an exchange on the traditional oppression of women in the Namboodiri and Muslim households. Most women were surprised to hear about the former as the Namboodiris are uppermost in the caste hierarchy—“and they treat their women so badly?”

Women have strongly suggested that the discussions on the women's questions now be carried into mixed groups with the fishermen. They feel that men must be present at the women's day celebrations too so that they too can have a chance to look into the question more seriously.

### **For the future**

The process has already been initiated at the level of the fishworkers union committee. The women strongly put forward two issues (1) regarding the treatment that male unionists met out to their wives (2) the consumption of liquor and problems related to alcoholism.

These issues were taken up at the taluk level meetings and it is interesting to note the response of the men. In the southern taluk men felt there is no real problem because they do share the burden of the household; in the central taluk men accepted the problem and were open to discuss it; in the north—central zone a predominantly Muslim area—men were actively involved in a signature campaign against the new Muslim women's Bill and were thus open to want to understand the problem more deeply, and in the northern taluks the men were absolutely closed and didn't show an interest even in the topic.

As a follow-up, information booklets on the question have been prepared for wider circulation and we hope to gradually relate the environmental issue, the feminist question to the class struggle.

Our conclusion therefore is that we do not build an autonomous women's association but that women continue to function autonomously within the ongoing class struggle. It is only in this way that the struggle for gender justice becomes a reality and goes along side to some extent proceeds the class confrontation.... a struggle within the struggle.

We can only say therefore that a process has begun.





*‘What did you do today dear,  
What did you do today?’*

## *BIOGRAPHIES*



**Mary Francis** is now 26 and lives in Mampally with her child in a room attached to her mother's house which she has built herself.

She recalls her childhood as being a very happy one although she grew up in the home of her father's parents and studied up till the 6th standard. She was taken back by her parents after three other children were born. She had to stop school in order to care for the younger children.

When she was 22 and when her parents were on the look out for a boy in marriage, she expressed her desire to marry the son of her aunt. This was disapproved of by her parents and so she was forced to marry the man they chose.

Married life was very short. From the 4th day on, her husband began to come home drunk. She tried her best to change him asking the advice and support of her family and friends. But there was no way out. He was a man who had worked a few years in the gulf, returned, got married and was thereafter unemployed.

She was pregnant in the first 3 months after marriage, after which the relation between her and her husband began to be estranged. He was often at his mother's house from where he got his money for liquor.

She recalls her first delivery with great sadness as there was no one to help except a young sister. Once the child was born she realised she had to work to keep both herself and her child alive. Her husband came in and out as he liked.

She managed to get a loan from the fishworkers's union and started the retail sales of vegetables in her room. Seeing that she began to be self-reliant, her husband started to harass her and she made complaints to the police. Her participation in the fishworker's union brought her some strength. The police took no action. One day when her husband went to harass her, quite drunk, she in self defence, grabbed the knife from nearby and gave him a gash on his arm. She remembers that all the neighbours supported her action as they had seen her continuously struggle against her useless husband. This incident occurred two



years ago and now she wants a divorce. She feels she can stand on her own and look after her child. She wants to support women in similar situations and fight alcoholism. Through her participation in the local women's organisation she has understood why women are oppressed and feels that women have to fight this together and fight the government and church that uphold the theory of male domination.

She wants to know more about the rest of society and feels all women should have chances to know more too.

Mary is socially very active although her work-day is long and strenuous. Purchasing and selling vegetables and fighting the exploitation in the market is also very tiring. She rests, only when she goes to sleep for 5 hours every night.

**Mary Sona Alphonse** lives in Mampally. She is 60 years old now. She has 8 children, 3 females and 5 males. She lives with her husband and children in a dilapidated house of their own with 3 rooms, a kitchen and varandah.

Mary Sona recalls that she lost her father when very young. As her mother had no experience of work and was not very healthy, Mary Sona started to vend fish from the age of 12 and has continued every day since. She had stopped off from school a couple of years earlier (the 2nd Std) as she had rebelled against the teacher who beat her brother who was studying with her.

She then recalls her married life which started when she was married off at 19 and was immediately pregnant. During this first pregnancy her husband quarrelled with her over a small thing and he left the house in a huff. The next she heard about him was after the child was born, when he was leaving to join the army, but had no chance to meet him although he had sent word. On realising he was going far away, and to the army at that, she began to miss him and fear about his life. So she was happy to see him come back to her on leave after 2 years and in between receive some money from him (Rs. 50-60). He was a different man now—drinking, demanding and even beating her. Each time he came, she became pregnant. He expressed no real affection towards the children, who, on the contrary, were afraid of him.

After 15 years in the army he came back and has been unemployed ever since—continuing to drink and demand she cares for him. She speaks about her hard days; getting up at 4 a.m. preparing food and going to the market. At noon she returns home, prepares food again and goes to the evening market. It is 6 years now since she discovered her husband was having an affair with a younger woman who was also pregnant. This was the turning point. She has decided not to have anything more to do with him.

She doesn't feel her life has been meaningless. She is proud that she has educated all her children, 4 of them have government jobs and one is still studying. She brought up her girls and boys alike and she finds solace in them. So she feels this is her fate and isn't able to think that anything can really change in this world.

**Mercy Alexander** is 28 years old and lives with her mother and her family on a 5 cents plot of land that belongs to her in Vettiyathura. Mercy has pleasant memories of her childhood when there were no restraints and differences made between her brothers and herself. It was in the upper and middle school years when she went to a convent school that differences between the rich and the poor were made. There was no means to express protest or disagreement. She had to walk 4 k. m. to reach school and if she was late she was scolded and beaten by the sisters. She succeeded to study only upto the 9th std.

She is one of 8 children; her father was a fisherman and mother a fish vendor and she was aware of the difficulties of their hard life. When she was 18, she had a chance to participate in a community workers programme (5 months course) and realised she had a responsibility to play in organising her people for their rights.

She is not married and isn't inclined for the same now that she is so involved in the unionization of the fishworkers. Moreover she feels that women are considered as things (commodities) in marriage and she intends to struggle against this. She knows there are women's movements of which she feels a part.

In her own work in the fishworker's union, she says she relates to 2 kinds of men; those who acknowledge the rights and equal status of women and those who don't. The men she works closely with fall into the first category. Because of this she feels that men can unlearn the patriarchal tendencies and feels this can happen only when women constantly interact with and challenge them.

She explains that she faced a great deal of opposition when she first began her village work. Men even made a joke of it, but this has gradually changed. When she began to work in the union, her own brother opposed her, but today he is an active member too.

Mercy realises that the social structures of oppression have to be changed. Firstly, there should be equality between men and women. Then, the economic struggle has to be waged to change the class divided society. She feels that just as men should change their idea of women as being the weaker sex and 'things of beauty', so should the capitalist class change their vision of workers whom they feel they have the right to exploit.

Mercy says that the initial training she received in Marianad and then the continuous reflections through her involvement in the union has helped her develop her perspective.

**Daisy** from Pulluvila is 27 years old and has 2 children, a boy and a girl. She lives in a part of her mother's hut without proper privacy or security.

She has studied upto the 7th standard after which she had to help with the younger children in the family. She has happy memories of her childhood when she loved being out on the sea shore to play.

When she was 22 her friends informed her that her father was looking out for a husband for her and that the boy he had selected was old enough to be her father. So Daisy begged of her mother to go with her to see this boy. As her mother didn't accept, she went with another woman and on arriving near the boy's house, she saw a man asleep on the floor—his hair quite grey and was told it was this man her father had spotted. She



then protested to her father but he threatened her saying he would commit suicide if she didn't accept. She had no other choice and so she was married.

Her husband didn't go to sea. He only helped pull the shore seine ashore and did nothing else. She tried to get over her prejudices but was unprepared and angry when he slept with her the second night itself. She was pregnant at once and then gave birth to a male child.

Very early in marriage there were days of complete starvation because he brought no money to the home. Neither was there any warm relation between them. Her hunger forced her to go to the market to earn some money. On such occasions she hoped her mother-in-law would care for her child.

It was not long before her mother-in-law told her to go back to her mother's house as there was disagreement between them. She resisted this for as long as she could, but when she felt she wasn't supported by her husband, she left. She gave birth to a daughter in her mother's house. Sometimes her husband goes to see her but its three months now since he has turned up.

Daisy hasn't forgiven her parents for this injustice to her. She loves her children, is proud to be a mother but is sad she will not be able to do all that she would like for them as she will have to support them only on her earnings in the market.

Daisy doesn't complain about having to work. Even before marriage she went to make nets at a women's employment centre. She enjoyed being with other women. But now in the market, she realises it is competitive work where she tries to keep to herself. For this she is suspected by her husband who feels she has other men friends.

Daisy feels women should be free to choose their husbands and their own work. She also feels that women and men should be told about the responsibilities of marriage before marriage. She doesn't want her children to suffer like her. She realises that only men have a place in today's society but that this should change.

**Martha** is a young woman, 28 years old and lives in Pulluvila with her husband and 2 daughters in a hut. As a child, she had to stop schooling when she was in the 3rd standard, in order to look after the younger children in the family. Her mother was a very sickly woman and so many of her childhood days were spent with her in hospital. The family was often hungry. Her father had left the home when she was 15 and said that his wife had cast a spell on him. One day she remembers being caught by her father on the street and beaten for casting a spell on him. She has no attachment to her father.

Martha recalls being happy with whatever she had. She worked in a neighbouring family and got some food when hungry. She made nets also to earn some money. She kept herself clean although her clothes were old. For this her neighbours were jealous. In fact when she was 16 there were already marriage proposals but all of them flopped listening to the comments of her neighbours. She was even engaged to one man but that too broke off. After that she was disgusted and told her family she would live single and support herself.

At 22, they forced her to marry a man she didn't like at all. He was 35 and very big made. From the 4th day onwards he began to be rude and unkind to her. Till the 5th month they had no physical contact and all his friends began to tease him. After that he began to use her forcefully, 4—5 times a day and she began to detest him. She was very soon pregnant, delivered a daughter and very soon was pregnant again and delivered another daughter. For this he was very angry and in anger came one day with a knife to cut off her feeding breasts.

She decided to be sterilised after the 2nd child although he protested as he wanted a son. He doesn't care much for the family and is away from the home for long periods.

Martha explains that she never had any great expectations about marriage but had expected at least a little more consideration. It is from a cinema that she had learnt about the responsibilities of a wife and mother and is sad that she cannot live up to it. She is happy to be a mother and tries her best to earn as much as she can through net making and going

sometimes to the market, in order to keep the fire burning in the kitchen.

As a wife she feels she has been only a machine at the disposal of her husband. She feels this is an injustice and that it has to change. Women are equal to men and they have to have a chance to be educated. She feels that traditions and customs are the greatest barriers to change. She hopes her husband, who has disappeared for 8 months now, never comes back.

**Leenamma** is a young woman of 29 years old and lives in a dilapidated hut in Pulluvila with her 3 children.

She herself was eldest of 9 children and though her father was a good fisherman, he had led the family to ruin because of his temptations to get involved in all village disputes. Her mother was not a responsible person at all and has never cared either for the home or the children,

Leenamma managed to complete her SSLC because of her own insistence but none of the other children went that far. At 18 she had started to work in the local village nursery, after a community workers training she had received in Marianad. She enjoyed her work in the nursery and was able to broaden her perspectives through her contacts with others.

She was married at the age of 23. She had wanted to marry a man who could accept her poor and disorganised family situation and fortunately for her she feels she was lucky that such a marriage was arranged for her. She had a lot of expectations about marriage as she had many occasions to talk about it with others she worked with. She feels that many of them can be realised with her husband, except for the fact that he is away in Rajasthan for many months a year as he works there. Moreover, she still has to care for her younger brothers and sisters that her parents do not care for and so continues to live at a level of subsistence. Her days are extremely long and strenuous but she has decided to continue her work with the fishworkers despite the home constraints. For this she has the support of her husband.



Her involvement in the community has made her aware of the way the structure in society continues to keep the masses in poverty. She feels this has to change and that only the exploited can do this through their conscious struggles. Nevertheless, she knows from experience that this is not easy. She feels that women are equal to men and that women too have to fight their exploitation. She says dowry should be abolished and that women should be given opportunities to develop their abilities. Men refuse to change because, of course they have a lot of privileges to lose.

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*According to the materialist conception the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This again is of a two-fold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, articles of food and clothing, dwellings and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one and of the family on the other.*

*F. Engels,*

*Preface to The Origin of The Family, 1884*

*.... The first class opposition that occurs in history coincides with the development of antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless together with slavery and private wealth it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others. It is the cellular form of civilized society in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully acting in that society can be already studied.*

*F. Engels, The Origin of the Family.*

*Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became head servant, excluded from all participation in social production .... The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules. In the great majority of cases today at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat.*

*F. Engels, The Origin of the Family.*













